

Agency of Trauma in Anand's *Untouchable* and Roy's *The God of Small Things*

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Abstract

Mulk Raj Anand's Untouchable (1935) and Arundhati Roy's The God of Small Things (1997) seek to represent the traumatic sufferings of the scheduled castes in the caste-ridden Indian society. The authors of the novels under study are not from the scheduled-castes the traumatic sufferings of whom they have tried to represent in the novels. When such is the case, the problematic resides in the authenticity of voice in the representation of dalits' traumatic sufferings. The traumatic pain of the downtrodden people the authors enact in the novels evokes the affect of sympathy in the readers. However, the big question in trauma theory is not just the sympathy that the authors evoke in their readers towards the traumatized protagonists but whether the evocation carries the direct voice of the authors and the middle voice. The projection of dalit subjectivity accompanied by the academic vocation also evokes the affect of sympathy, besides the construction of pain in the transaction between language and body. The agency of trauma supports the representation of dalits' trauma only when the authentic voice of the authors accompanies the narrativization of pain. Examined in the light of Dominick LaCapra's notion of the middle-voice and Melissa Gregg's idea of communicating investment, this research has come to the conclusion that Anand's representation of dalits' trauma in Untouchable carries the agency of trauma, which is consistent throughout the novel, whereas; Roy's representation of dalits' trauma remains ambivalent vis-à-vis the consistency of the agency of trauma in the novel The God of Small Things. Therefore, the intensity of the agency of dalits' trauma in Untouchable is more intriguing than in The God of Small Things.

Keywords; Agency of trauma, casteist (cultural) trauma, communicating investment, dispossession, middle-voice, (mis)representation, subjectivity, (de)subjectification

Introduction

The writers of *The God of Small Things* and *Untouchable* neither take the side of the perpetrator, nor that of the victim in narrating the traumatic experiences of the dalit characters in prima facie. They simply narrate events that cripple the life of the characters thereby maintaining their position in the middle ground or what Primo Levy calls the "gray zone" (qtd. in *Remnants of Auschwitz* 24). In other words, they simply show the hurt done to

the untouchables without making judgment from ethical stance. The readers get shocked when reading the portion of the novel that narrates about Mammachi's spitting on the face of Velutha on her knowledge of his messing up with her daughter Ammu in *The God of Small Things* and sympathize him as he stands silent without power to resist to her doing so. The sympathy is grounded in the agency of trauma supported by the middle voice inherent in the narration. Roy narrates Velutha's traumatic sufferings remaining in the middle ground which obscures her position vis-à-vis the perpetrator and the victim. And this is from where agency of trauma emerges. Her narration of Velutha's beating by the police in the History House is no less important in relation to the middle voice in narration. Nothing is more traumatizing than living a life as (sub)humans with fear of others touching or seeing and vice versa. The protagonist of *Untouchable* is not in exception in this regard. His consciousness is ingrained with this fact when he walks in the street as a sweeper. He keeps shouting out the word 'posh' repeatedly to inform high-caste people of his approach so that he could avoid his polluting them. No matter how rough the words high-caste people use are when they abuse Bakha, he becomes "deaf and dumb" and presents himself with "humility and servility" (*Untouchable* 38). This paper has sought to uncover the recounting of dalit characters' intolerable and endless sufferings to see if it carries the middle-voice thereby examining the subjectivity of the victimized.

Agency of Trauma in the Representation of Suffering

Reading *Untouchable* establishes the notion that high-caste people are responsible for the begging tendency of the low-caste vermin Bakha, a sweeper, whose life greatly depends on what other people provide him with. Looking at his begging in the positive light, he becomes able to sustain life; however, the tremendous level of humiliation he feels in so doing, sweeping and cleaning the dirt traumatizes him to a great extent. He informs the owner of the houses his arrival and keeps waiting for the food to be brought down. Once a woman discovers him at the gate of her house sleeping and wakes him up. She flings down the leftover food which is wet saying "Vey Bakha, take this. Here's your bread down" (65) and abuses him using unpleasant words; "you eater of your masters, may the vessel of your life never float in the sea of existence! May you parish and die! Go! Get up get up! You eater of your masters! Why didn't you shout if you wanted food? Is this your father's house that you come and rest here?" (63). The way the woman flings down the bread at him reminds us of a human giving a dog food. She condemns him to die and shows her extreme hatred towards him in such a way that he feels numb. And the numbness he feels makes him forget the way home: "with a mind occupied by things, Bakha didn't find the way home very long" (66). He feels "suffocated" (70) and "contemplates his experience now in the spirit of resignation which he had inherited through the long centuries down through his countless outcaste ancestors fixed, yet flowing like a wave, confirmed at the beginning of each generation by the discipline of the caste ideal" (57).

The enormity of being untouchable is what Bakha realizes further in the abusive behavior of the caste people. A high-caste man walking on the road abuses him saying "You swine, you dog, why didn't you shout and warn me of your approach! Don't you know, you brute, that you must not touch me!" (*Untouchable* 38). The abuse gets intense further as the man keeps spluttering: "the dirty dog bumped right into me! So unmindfully do these sons of bitches walk in the streets! (39). Bakha is compared to (dirty) animals like swine and dog. Both of them add to his image of being less than a human, and thus dehumanized and traumatized. It is very clear that "he was used to being spoken to roughly" (38). At this point, the research anticipates L. Chris Fox as he states that the "exposure to the abject could be such an external determinant, that trauma is a response to the abject and that the degree of trauma experienced is in direct proportion to the degree of abjection experienced, a degree which is always dependent on context, both personal and social" (*A Martyrology of the Abject: Witnessing and Trauma in Arundhati Roy's The God of Small Things* 37-38). Therefore, Bakha is a social abject and abjection is the source of his traumatic pain.

The ideology of defilement or pollution is what the high-caste people are very much conscious about. They seek to clean the pollution bathing after the defilement. Lalla at a point abusing Bakha says, "You've touched me; I will have to bathe now and purify myself anyhow. Well, take this for your damned irresponsibility, you son of a swine! And the tonga-wallah heard a sharp, clear slap through the air" (*Untouchable* 41). Lalla slaps him on the face as the latter happens to touch the former. Even the pedestrians do not show sympathy for him when he is abused in the street; they "circle round Bakha, keeping at a distance of several yards from him, but joining in to aid and encourage the aggrieved man in his denunciation (39). And it is thus an organized violence which he cannot resist or go against. Therefore, "every second seemed an endless age of woe and suffering" to Bakha (40). His legs "trembled and shook under him" (41). This physical reaction gives way to the middle-voice.

Arundhati Roy's assumption in *TGST* that "man's substantial urge to destroy what he could neither subdue nor defy," (308) that is "men's need," (309) is what makes Velutha and Ammu make "the unthinkable thinkable and the Impossible really happen" in messing up with each other" (256). They are "battling an epidemic" and "inoculating a community" in doing so (309). He has feeling for her even when he knows it well that "if he loved her, he couldn't leave, and if he fought, he couldn't win" (330). He crosses the river to go to the History House to meet Ammu at night secretly and enjoys beautiful time with her until the affair is public. The information about the affair soon reaches Mammachi, Ammu's mother and she gets mad thinking about her daughter's messing up with a low-caste vermin facing the body of a Paravan with "a particular smell" (157). Mammachi almost vomits thinking about their coupling. Getting so much angry, "Mammachi spat into Velutha's face. Thick

spit. It spattered across his mouth and eyes" (285). It is really a degrading, humiliating and traumatizing experience for Velutha to have her spit on his face. He remains unmoved, silent.

The real physical trauma Velutha undergoes begins as he is discovered in the History House by the police after he spends the whole night with Ammu. The police "woke Velutha with their boots" as he is found to be sleeping. They beat him bloody until the energy of his body supports him and soon he surrenders: "They heard the thud of wood on flesh. Boot on bone. On teeth. The muffled grunt when a stomach is kicked in. The muted church of skull on cement. The gargle of blood on a man's breath when his lung is torn by the jagged end of a broken rib" (308). This beating provides readers with a severe shock thinking that a human like him is undergoing tremendous pain for no logical reason. And the result is:

His skull was fractured in three places. His nose and both his cheekbones were smashed, leaving his face pulpy, undefined. The blow to his mouth had split open his upper lip and broken six teeth, three of which were embedded in his lower lip, hideously inverting his beautiful smile. Four of his ribs were splintered. One had pierced his left lung, which was what made him bleed from his mouth. The blood on his breath bright red. Fresh. Frothy. His lower intestine was ruptured and hemorrhaged, the blood collected in his abdominal cavity. His spine was damaged in two places, the concussion had paralyzed his right arm and resulted in a loss of control over his bladder and rectum. Both his knee caps were shattered. (310)

Velutha is beaten in such way that it is his body or the wound that speaks, not him. The transaction between body and language is established at this point which affirms the presence of the middle-voice in the narration.

Ron Eyerman in "*Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*" postulates, "Cultural trauma occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, making memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways" (1). He holds the idea that cultural trauma is a "socially mediated attribution" (8) for it is "not something naturally existing; it is something constructed by society" (2). It gives birth to "some negative affects" (39) like "guilt, shame, humiliation, disgust, anger" (39) etc. in the victims.

If anticipated Eyerman's notion of cultural trauma, the casteist trauma is but a sort of cultural trauma. The casteist cultural trauma Velutha in *TGST* and Bakha in *Untouchable* experience impairs their existence for they are dispossessed of what rightfully belongs to them and thus are like *muselmann*. Agamben conceptualizes *muselmann* as "the non-human who obstinately appears as human" the discussion of whom cannot take place "apart from the inhuman" (*Remnants of Auschwitz* 81-82) since he is deprived of "dignity and (self) respect" (63).

The untouchables are dispossessed of what naturally belongs to them i.e. humanness. Regarding the coinage dispossession, Judith Butler, in conversation with Athena Athanasiou in *Dispossession: The Performative in the Political*, maintains that it "carries the presumption that someone has been deprived of something that rightfully belongs to them" (6). Bakha and Velutha are dispossessed of the humanness that rightfully belongs to them which results in their helplessness and vulnerability. This marked helplessness renders them traumatic. Therefore, the untouchables are the social subjects of dispossession. Athanasiou tries to shed light on her notion of dispossession with the assertion that it is a "process and ideologies by which persons are disowned and abjected by normative and normalizing powers that define cultural intelligibility and that regulate the distribution of vulnerability" (2).

The novelists' *écriture* is but an "ethico-political activity" (*Writing History, Writing Trauma* 219) or "ethical and political way(s) of objecting to forcible and coercive dispossession" (*Dispossession: The Performative in the Political* 7) which seeks to uncover precarious existence of the traumatized dalits. They tell us "the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality as truth that is not otherwise available" (*Unclaimed Experience* 4) and thus they make literature, as Cathy Caruth states, "a prime place for giving voice to trauma" (qtd. in *Writing History, Writing Trauma* 190) the dalits undergo in Indian society. Tancred anticipates Caruth's notion of literature as the story of wound as he states, "The voice of trauma emerges from the wound" (qtd. in *Writing History, Writing Trauma* 182). These writers' scholarly endeavor to showcase *dalits'* traumatic voice in their novels is but what Eleanor Kaufman calls an intellectual hospitality they provide to the downtrodden (qtd. in *Communicating Investment* 16). These writers make "an attempt to restore to victim the dignity of which they were deprived by their oppressors" (178).

The novelists' putting forward the testimony of the untouchables' traumatic suffering gives rise to the emergence of middle-voice. LaCapra in *Writing History, Writing Trauma* defines middle voice as an "in-between voice of undecidability and the unavailability or radical ambivalence of clear-cut positions" (19). Roland Barthes argues, "The middle voice corresponds exactly to the state of the verb to write" (qtd. in *Writing History, Writing Trauma* 25). Pierre Vernant professes this line of thought about middle-voice as he states, "the middle voice designates the type of action where the agent remains enveloped in the released action" (qtd. in *Writing History, Writing Trauma* 28). The novelists' writing trauma carries the middle voice and exposes the victimization in such a way that it echoes the voice of the sufferer in Lidwig Wittgenstein's line "I am in pain" (*Philosophical Investigations* 246).

The pain the victims experience unsettles the readers empathically which leads to the evocation of the affect of sympathy in them. The readers empathize with Bakha. This empathy occurs in what Megan Bowler calls "a social situation" and it gives rise to

sympathy which is "altruistic" in nature (*Feeling Power* 157). The readers involve in what Davis calls "perspective taking to spontaneously adopt the psychological point of view of the other" thereby showing "empathic concern to experience the feeling of sympathy and compassion for the unfortunate other" and go through "personal distress and discomfort in response to extreme distress in the other" (*Handbook of the Sociology of Emotions* 448). Christopher S. Schmitt and Candace Clark in the article "*Sympathy*" define sympathy as "feeling sorry, genuinely or otherwise, a co-worker, an acquaintance, a stranger or even a social category" (469) which is "an experience of emotions similar to another's or on behalf of the other" (469). The readers of the novels under study feel sorry for the traumatized characters. Therefore, the unfolding of this *dalit's* trauma that has its own agency for the genuine feeling of sympathy the readers feel is spontaneous and unrestrained.

Mulk Raj Anand's showcasing of *dalit's* trauma in "*Untouchable*" has agency because he communicates investment in his what Melissa Gregg calls "academic vocation" (*Communicating Investment* 25). Communicating investment, Gregg states, is "a commitment to scholarly practice" (1). It is the writer's doing justice to the subject matter he writes about. The usefulness of Anand's "interventionist strategy" (16) he employs with "historical mindedness" (17) in dealing with the traumatic sufferings of the untouchables in the novel ultimately communicates his investment. Gregg argues that the mode of intervention the writer adopts is a crucial commentary on existing hermeneutics and the way a writer writes is a sympathetic of what he/she attempts to convey and each chapter offers a reading of the particular 'voice' that is used to do so (7). This voice, she states quoting Roland Barthes, is like "a signature in its uniqueness" (11) which encourages in readers a sympathetic reading emanating out of the affect existing within the text itself and arising from the page as it is read (9). The grain of voice, Gregg argues, is capable of affecting the readers in ways that stimulates sympathy (11). However, the readers' encounter with the writer's voice requires desubjection on the part of both the writer and the reader (15). In other words, the writer and the reader should avoid their cultural-political situatedness to make the communicating investment work.

This commitment to the scholarly practice is found to be lacking in *TGST* by Arundhati Roy. It is so for a few reasons. First, she oscillates between and among the voices of *dalits* and those of high-caste characters in the novel. There are voices than a single voice of the untouchable, Velutha. She gives only a small place to *dalit's* traumatic suffering in the novel. She remains silent about Velutha's pain in most of the chapters except in the two chapters '*The God of Small Things*' and '*The History House*' even though there are twenty one chapters in total. Similarly, the complex dialogic narrative structure employed in the novel, becomes a great hindrance to the unfolding of *dalits'* trauma for it prevents the narrator (author) from realizing communicating investment and involvement with untouchables' traumatic sufferings due to her oscillation between and among the voices of different

characters, touchable and untouchable. The narration moves back and forth in time and space between and among the characters thereby blocking the writer's focus on her commitment to scholarly practice in treating the subject matter of an untouchable's traumatic suffering. Besides, she focuses more on physical pain of Velutha thereby neglecting the psychological devastation he undergoes.

Dalit Subjectivity in *Untouchable* and *The God of Small Things*

The novelists have projected dalit subjectivity which gives way to the middle-voice in the narration. Bakha in *Untouchable* is "always ashamed of being seen" (95). Shame is what causes the crisis in his subjectivity. Agamben calls shame a "dominant sentiment" (*Remnants of Auschwitz* 83) which appears as "the most proper emotive tonality of subjectivity" (109). Benjamin regards shame as a form of disgust which is nothing but "the fear of being recognized by what repulses us" (qtd. in *Remnants of Auschwitz* 107). The theorists Benjamin and Agamben perceive shame as but a sentiment which renders the subjectivity of a subject into crisis. Bakha's subjectivity is in crisis as he feels being ashamed of being seen. Maria Boletsi in her article "*From the Subject of the Crisis to the Subject in Crisis: Middle Voice on Greek Walls*" observes that "agency is grounded in the subject's publicly sharing vulnerability" (3) which emerges from the literal inscription of her vulnerability, as it erupts in public sphere" (14). It is important to note at this point that Anand, projecting dalit subjectivity as vulnerable thereby having shame as the dominant sentiment, publicly shares Bakha's vulnerability in his writing, a public sphere. Besides, the treatment he gets from the high caste people around him hurls him into the "despair," i.e. he is in torment (111). And therefore he cries in "exasperation" thereby expressing his wish to die and vanish from the world (110).

Bakha could be described here as what Giorgio Agamben calls *homo sacer*, whose body has the "capacity to be killed but not sacrificed" (*Homo Sacer* 61). Agamben observes, "*homo sacer* is unsacrificeable, yet he may nevertheless be killed by anyone" (67) who is "captured in the sovereign ban" (53). Agamben explains, "the sovereign is the one with respect to whom all men are potentially *homines sacri*, and *homo sacer* is the one with respect to whom all men act as sovereigns" (53). And the dimension in which the victimization of *homo sacer* takes place is biopolitics (68). Velutha's body bears the capacity to be killed but not sacrificed because it is thought to be impure or unholy. And it is caught in the sovereign ban for it cannot do whatever it likes going beyond the casteist ideology illegitimately and implicitly sanctioned by the state. All the caste people regard dalit body as the one with respect to which they act as sovereigns. The place where the victimization of dalit body takes place is bio-politics which is the power relationship between the touchables and untouchables. Therefore, Roy projects the subjectivity of dalit's trauma as vulnerable just like *homo sacer*.

However, Roy's deification of Velutha as the God of small things rather than the big things is problematic in the sense that this venture creates doubt about her sincerity in the readers regarding the representation and the projection of dalit subjectivity. This hints at the assumption that big things is the arena of the caste people, not those of the outcaste(d). Viewed in this line of thought, Roy indirectly supports the casteist ideology which she is supposed to debunk because calling Velutha the God of small things is denying his capacity to be the God of big things and reasserting the fact that touchables are the Gods of big things. Agency of dalit's trauma is hindered at this point.

Bakha loses self-respect and dignity for he loses the sense of humanity living under the dehumanizing system of untouchability in *Untouchable*. His autonomous subjectivity is paralyzed and thus he has no choice save suffering the pain as a passive and vulnerable subject in crisis. The suffocation and feeling of shame he feels when he is made to clean the human excretion, the pain and the grief he feels as he is attributed with subhuman position, the compulsion regarding the vicinity with the high-caste people he has to reject, the humiliation he has to undergo in sustaining life with the leftover food from the high-caste people, the feeling of hatred of the high-caste people he has to face, the way he is made to feel that he is different and thus inferior, the anger arising from his getting beaten he has to suppress, the unlivable life he has to live without dignity and the self-respect, the way he is made vulnerable to resist the injustice he has to suffer from and the way he is dehumanized and dispossessed of subjectivity in the novel hint at the fact that his subjectivity is in crisis. The crisis-stricken subjectivity of Bakha is what renders Anand a privileged position of not taking the side either of the victim or of the perpetrator. Anand maintains communicating investment throughout the novel by focusing on the tormented body of Bakha. His body is made to speak about the injustice. Therefore, the sympathy evoked in the readers is genuine and there is consistency in the presence of agency of trauma in the narrativization of pain in Anand's *Untouchable*.

The crisis in the subjectivity emanates from the body in torment also in the case of Velutha in Roy's *The God of Small Things*. It is so because a dalit's body is an abjected body which undergoes a tremendous pain as a consequence of physical abuse. Roy shows the body of Velutha in pain as he gets beaten to death. His skull fractured in three places, his nose and both his cheekbones smashed, his six broken teeth, four of his ribs splintered, pierced left lung, the blood on his mouth and the blood on his breath bright red, his lower intestine ruptured and hemorrhaged, the blood collected in his abdominal cavity, his spine damaged in two places, his paralyzed right arm, the loss of control over his bladder and rectum and both his knee caps shattered are the evidences that his body is in torment. It is Velutha's body that speaks of the injustice done to him and the dehumanization he undergoes, not the author. Therefore, the sympathy evoked in the readers towards the victimized protagonist is genuine in this regard which gives rise to the agency of trauma in the novel.

Both writers have overplayed the projection of dalit's body in torment and dalit's subjectivity in crisis in the novels under study as a consequence of casteist ideology practiced in the caste-ridden Indian society. Some of the negative emotions such as shame, guilt, grief, disgust, humiliation, anger and hatred undermine dalit subjectivity in Anand's *Untouchable* and Roy's *The God of Small Things*.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Arundhati Roy and Mulk Raj Anand share the same humanistic ground in trying to represent the traumatic sufferings of the downtrodden and disempowered scheduled-caste people in the novels under study. However, Anand, as a humanist, strengthens his position in showing his concern for the plight of the victimized in writing more than Arundhati does, if viewed in the light of scholarly commitment to the issue he treats. The academic vocation in Anand's scholarly endeavor regarding the subject he treats, i.e. outcastes' pain, sets in motion the consistency of agency of trauma throughout the novel *Untouchable*. This consistency in agency of trauma present in the novel is the evidence that his sympathy for the outcastes is the direct result of his being empathetic in reenacting the victim's pain. Roy's writing, which lacks scholarly commitment to the dalits' pain it addresses, thus, is the evidence that she is more sympathetic than being empathetic. The writer's being sympathetic more than being empathetic invites problem in representing pain. Sympathy renders fake if empathy is lacking in the representation. This lack surfacing in Roy's writing hinders the agency of trauma. Trauma narration must be just to free the victimized from injustice and seek to (re)establish reconciliation between the conflicting groups. Trauma narration must expose the wound in a just and convincing way just as Anand does in *Untouchable* without setting the writer in the ambivalent position. Anand accomplishes this task successfully, whereas; Roy lags behind in this regard. Therefore, the novel *The God of Small Things* merely ventriloquizes the author's political activism.

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